
An Analysis of Suffering in Indian Camp by Ernest Hemingway and Sonny's Blues by James Baldwin

In many instances works of literature portray real life situations whether it be physical, emotional or mental issues. Humans all experience some form of suffering in their lives. Works of literature use the theme of suffering to portray how people suffer in their own way and how they react to their suffering. Authors like James Baldwin and Ernest Hemingway use the theme of suffering to add realistic situations and drama to their short stories to connect to the readers.

In James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues," the story is about a young jazz musician named Sonny who battles his addiction to heroin. His story and his pain are explained to us from his brother's point of view, who is the narrator. In the beginning, we find out that Sonny was arrested for using and selling drugs and then later on when he is released from prison, he moves in with the narrator and his family in Harlem, New York. Through the narrator's point of view, we can understand the different forms of suffering throughout this story.

Many of the characters in the story suffer in their own way. Of course, the central issue in this piece is drug addiction, but also the issues of grief, poverty and limited opportunities in life are evident. Some of the characters try to fight to escape their suffering while others accept their pain.

Sonny suffers in different ways but the most obvious one is his drug addiction. According to the narrator, Sonny started using heroine when he was just in high school. Currently, the narrator is a high school teacher. He says, "I was sure that the first time Sonny had ever had [heroine], he couldn't have been older than these boys were now" (265). Growing up in Harlem played a role in the start of Sonny's use of heroin – poverty is everywhere and there is an abundance of drugs. Sonny tried escaping the suffering he experienced from poverty by leaving Harlem to pursue a music career but he never escaped the hold drugs had on him.

His inability to escape poverty in his teenage years is what led him to drugs – he felt in control when he was using them. He couldn't control his situation of living in a place like Harlem so he used heroin to cope. "...what heroin feels like sometimes...warm and cool...it makes you feel-in control. Sometimes you've got to have that feeling" (286). He goes on to tell his brother that heroin allowed him to stand the misery he suffered living in Harlem. He further explains how he felt like he had control of his life when he was under the influence: "No, there's no way not to suffer. But you try all kinds of ways to keep from drowning in it, to keep on top of it, and to make it seem – well, like you...." (287). He believed that the suffering he endured from heroine was

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only because he chose to suffer, unlike the suffering he endured living in Harlem which was not in his control.

Sonny also suffered from being in jail and knowing that he hurt his family. After he received a letter from his brother while he was in jail, Sonny wrote back saying, "You don't know how much I needed to hear from you. I wanted to write you many a time but I dug how much I must have hurt you and so I didn't write" (269). Jail was causing him emotional and mental suffering but he didn't reach out to his brother because he was suffering over the guilt of upsetting him with his drug addiction. The pain of knowing he let his brother down influenced his decision to not reach out even if he needed family support when he was at his lowest.

Besides Sonny, the narrator is also suffering but in a different way; he is suffering from grief. After finding out that Sonny got arrested for using and selling drugs, the narrator was in shock. "A great block of ice got settled in my belly and kept melting there slowly all day long, while I taught my classes algebra. It was a special kind of ice...Sometimes it hardened and seemed to expand until I felt my guts were going to come spilling out or that I was going to choke or scream" (264). The narrator is suffering silently, unable to express his emotions. He doesn't fall apart, as if he knew this would happen sooner or later because of his brother's situation. The narrator is angry – angry at what Harlem did to his brother, angry at what his brother keeps doing to himself and angry at anyone who knew Sonny before he left Harlem. He runs into someone who was an old friend of Sonny. That old friend is also an addict. For a brief moment the man looked like Sonny to the narrator until he realized it wasn't him but that he also reminded him of Sonny. The narrator has a strong feeling of hate towards Sonny's old friend because of how his situation is similar to Sonny's. The narrator talks with him about Sonny and what will happen to him after prison. When he is about to leave the man, the man asks for some money and the narrator knows what he'll be using it for so he feels sympathetic and compassionate. "All at once something inside gave and threatened to come pouring out of me. I didn't hate him any more. I felt that in another moment I'd start crying like a child" (268). He doesn't hate the man anymore but almost physically expresses his grief over him and Sonny and what their lives have become. Seeing the man gives him memories of his brother before he left Harlem.

Another instance of suffering in the story which isn't really talked about is the suffering the boys growing up in Harlem have to endure. Their opportunities to try to escape the harsh life of Harlem are limited. The narrator compares their situation to his and Sonny's situation growing up in Harlem. "These boys, now, were living as we'd been living then, they were growing up with a rush and their heads bumped abruptly against the low ceiling of their actual possibilities" (265). The boys know they don't have much of a chance to make a change to their lives, to overcome the obstacles blocking them from achieving success and to change the circumstances they are in.

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Suffering is expressed in different ways in this story. Some are actually dealing with their form of suffering directly while others aren't. Either way, suffering is present in all of their lives, and will affect them whether they acknowledge it or not.

In Ernest Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp," a young boy named Nick goes to an American Indian camp on the other side of the lake with his father, who is a doctor, and his Uncle George. His father was called to help deliver a baby of an American Indian woman who has been in labor for the past two days. She is in pain and Nick watches as the situation unfolds in front of his eyes.

The theme of suffering is evident in this story and the suffering by two of the characters is caused by the unborn baby itself. There are both physical and mental suffering and each character deals with the pain in their own way.

The Indian woman is suffering from the physical pain of being in painful labor for two days. She has been screaming for days and the doctor was unable to stop her screaming because he doesn't have any anesthetic. The Indian woman goes through more physical pain when the doctor started operating on her without the right surgical supplies. The doctor proudly states how he did the operation: "...a Caesarian with a jackknife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders" (481). She is unable to control her suffering but she does try to cope with it when Uncle George is next to her. She bit on his arm when she was being held down by him and three other Indian men while the doctor operated on her.

The Indian woman's husband is suffering from the mental pain of witnessing his wife going through labor. The husband is suffering from shame – the fact that his wife was impregnated by another man, let alone a white man. He is also suffering from the physical pain from when he had cut his foot badly with an axe. Listening to his wife scream in pain was also causing his suffering since he couldn't escape her cries and he knows the only reason why she is in this situation is because of Uncle George. The husband is in mental pain when Nick asks his dad to make her stop screaming the doctor replies with "...her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important" (480). As soon as he said that, the husband "rolled over against the wall" (480). He is also suffering from the mental oppression from the white men and from the fact that the doctor doesn't deem his wife's physical pain as important. In society, men aren't supposed to expose their weaknesses and show that they are suffering. So, the husband silently takes the mental pain he is enduring which ultimately leads to his suicide.

At the end of the story, Nick asks his father about the Indian woman's husband. He asks, "Why did he kill himself, Daddy?" to which the father replied, "I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess" (481). Nick's father knows that the Indian man couldn't bare to stand his mental pain much longer so he committed suicide as a way to deal with his suffering.

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Both characters deal with their suffering in different ways. Gender has a role in how both the Indian man and Indian woman choose to deal with their pain. Suffering can be linked to weakness and that is why the Indian man did not express himself in any way. Instead, he stayed in his spot on the bed, lying down until he couldn't take it anymore. The Indian woman however did express herself and because she is a woman, her signs of weakness were deemed as normal.

Suffering is a state of physical, emotional or mental pain that is unavoidable. How someone chooses to deal with their suffering is what determines whether or not a person is able to overcome their problems. Both James Baldwin and Ernest Hemingway brilliantly use the theme of suffering to portray how it affects different people in different situations.

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